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History of the Center for Small Towns: from inception to 2004

By Roger McCannon, with interview questions in the fall of 2013 by
Zak Threadgill, CST Student Employee

In the early 1990's, while working at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM), I represented three different units of the University--Continuing Education and Extension (CEE)-Minneapolis campus, Continuing Education Regional Programs and Summer Session (CERP)-Morris campus, as well as the University of Minnesota Extension Service (MES)-St. Paul campus.

The idea for the Center for Small Towns (CST) came about (circa 1993) in an annual evaluation meeting with UMM Chancellor David Johnson. We met for lunch with Harold Miller, Dean of Continuing Education and Extension, and Pat Borich, Dean of University Extension Service at the Faculty Club in Coffman Union on the Twin Cities campus.

We had been doing a lot of community outreach and continuing education work with different regional groups trying to help with economic development and human service needs in west central Minnesota. It was Chancellor David Johnson who, during the meeting, brought up the idea of setting up a center for the study of small towns. Everyone jumped on the idea and said you can start something in Morris. Chancellor Dave then tossed the ball to me and said "it's an idea, make it happen."

I was fortunate at the time to be a Collegiate Program Leader (CPL) with the Minnesota Extension Service (MES). The MES had seed money from which CPLs could apply for a small grant to get projects going on their campus. I applied for and received a grant to do some focus groups around the region. I hired a consultant, Pat Conroy from C&C Consultants out of Fergus Falls, to facilitate the focus groups. Earlier in his career, Pat had worked for Continuing Education for a short period of time before he worked for the West Central Initiative Fund; he then started a private consulting business. We pulled together community leaders, mayors, chamber directors, etc. and had focus group meetings in Morris, Milan, and Starbuck.

From the focus groups we discovered that community leaders and the communities they represent didn't want to be studied, they wanted help. They wanted help with community projects including how to retain community vitality, figuring out their direction, and studies surrounding cash flow analysis. Communities also wanted help with promotion and marketing of their communities. New technology was emerging at the time, and they wanted help bringing it into their communities. The services of CST have always responded to community requests.

We brought that information together and decided the Center for Small Towns was a good name for our organization. A student created a logo, which is still being used today. We developed brochures and sent them out to the communities saying "we are here to help if you need it." The idea was to get students working and studying with these communities, and involve faculty from their majors. It was a win-win situation—the communities received service, and the students worked in the communities in their areas of study, all while helping them build a stronger resume.

Funding was difficult in the early years, we didn't have a lot of money to operate. Fortunately, CERP staff were able to provide CST with infrastructure support (e.g. administrative, clerical, accounting) until CERP was disassembled in 2009. To provide some funding for CST, we pieced together grants from within the University. At about the same time, Service Learning was becoming a focus on campus. There had been a couple of seed grants within Service Learning through an organization called Minnesota Campus Compact. During that period of time my wife, Carol McCannon, was involved in coordinating the Service Learning and directed the Campus Compact activities on campus. Both Campus Compact and the Center for Small Towns were focused on community service and outreach.

CERP/CST pieced together some funding to hire a young UMM graduate, Ben Winchester, to be the first CST staff person. The Center also got some funding from the Minnesota Extension Service Collegiate Program Leader (CPL) project.

At that time, Robert Bruininks, then Provost of the University and later President, came to Morris for a meeting. He liked the idea of a Center for Small Towns and identified with the work we were doing. He saw CST as a way for UMM students to engage in applied activity while within their academic learning environment on campus. Bruininks provided some funding; at first we were allocated about \$65,000 in non-recurring funding, and about a year later were given \$100,000 for sustained funding of CST.

This was all taking place in the mid 90's. I don't know the exact date, but somewhere along the line we arbitrarily said that the Center was established in 1995. We went out and did work in pilot communities such as Breckenridge, Starbuck and Milan to get experience. We used newspapers and brochures to get the word out to chambers of commerce, commercial booster clubs, mayors, and community leaders. We also set up an advisory council for the Center. The advisory council provided suggestions and nominations for communities to work with.

Ben Winchester left for graduate school at the University of Missouri where he worked on his master's degree in rural sociology and was gone for a number of years. The Center then hired David Fluegel, UMM alum, to manage the day-to-day operations. With some additional funding, we were able to hire another UMM graduate, Heather Agesen, to focus on hiring and support for student involvement. Jes Beyer was hired to fill this position after Heather left. Barb Hesse was the support staff for the Center.

It wasn't until 1998, 1999, 2000 that the Center really came into its own. We were fortunate enough to team up with the Blandin Foundation, an organization based out of Grand Rapids, MN focused on rural communities and helping small towns. We received a major grant from the Blandin Foundation to work as partners in implementing a Community Investment Partnership grant program for small towns (BCIP-- first grant \$191,600 4/23/99-5/31/02, Continuation Grant \$187,000 6/1/01-6/1/04). Again we picked some model communities to work with, Morris, community clusters—Big Stone Lake area and Traverse County—and started projects in those towns. David Fluegel and Kjersti Hanneman were the staff coordinating our efforts. We did some great work and gained great experience; the Prairie Renaissance Cultural Alliance was one of the outcomes of the Center's efforts in Morris.

When Ben finished up his master's degree he was rehired and we started a data analysis component for the Center. He worked with a lot of chambers of commerce and small towns to provide them with

demographic and economic data. Ben's background was in statistics and math, with a master's degree in rural sociology. When he came back, those two skills blended well together.

In October, 2004, we received a grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to work in Morris on a cooperative program with the community of Morris—Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC). The grant period was four years, 10/21/04-7/21/08; outcomes included a housing study and an idea factory for supporting entrepreneurs. The original vision is still used today: Believing in a bright future for small communities. Small communities went through tough times in the 80's due to the big economic fallout in the farming sector where land was bought, then interest rates went up and there were a lot of foreclosures, a lot of auctions and selloffs, then dairy farms followed that.

Zak: How did you define a small community?

A small community is 5,000 or less, I believe the number was arbitrary, could have been 4,000, it could have been 6,000. In MN 85% of incorporated cities/towns are of 5,000 population or less.

Zak: How has CST evolved?

Well I think CST matured in the late 90's, early 2000 era, particularly when we were able to have more staff. I think David, Ben and Heather worked to refine the aspects of CST. We were doing some evaluation programs in towns, data analysis, and technical assistance, those sorts of things. What I've followed is the number of students that have been able to have a role and play a part in the Center. It is ongoing and is a strong suit of the Center.

Zak: Who was your successor?

Tom McRoberts replaced me in 2004. Tom was Associate Director of Continuing Education Regional Programs and Summer Session (CERP). At that time CERP had evening classes, summer session, and international programs; CST was also under the umbrella of CERP. It was kind of a conglomerate of a whole bunch of different services of the campus. When I retired, he took over as Director of CERP and the Center for Small Towns.

Tom did a great job and everyone respected and loved Tom. The campus was his life, he was a student here, graduated, went on to graduate school and then came back, taught here, and worked in the CERP office. His association with UMM was almost 50 years. Unfortunately, Tom passed away in 2010.

Zak: What is your favorite thing about working with the Center? Projects that are memorable?

I had a number of students who had worked here, and some would come in as a freshman and stay with the Center through their senior year. I remember getting letters from some of them saying the most significant aspects of their college experience was being able to work for the Center.

There were a couple of times we helped with bringing in the Minnesota Design Team to look at the community and the region to help give ideas about how they look to visitors and what can be done

physically, socially and economically to enhance our towns. The projects of the Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) grant were more focused on the community of Morris to enhance ways for communities to access the resources of UMM. Together, CST, UMM and the City of Morris received a national award for that, the *Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration*. The award was given in numerous states throughout the country, CST was the 2006 Minnesota recipient.

Zak: Where would you like to see the program go?

I'd like to see it continue and be secure. I know we've had financial issues with the State and budget cutbacks through the University and some restructuring on the campus. I want to make sure the Center stays focused. Morris has a unique role in the region, it is the presence of the University of Minnesota and it is teaching students, but there is also a service to the community and the region. The land grant mission of the University of Minnesota is teaching, research and outreach. It is the outreach that needs to continue from the base of the campus here.

Zak: There are a lot of different components that were a part of CST.

There were different twists and turns, but any time you create something new you have to find your way.

For six or seven years, there was a Rural Development Council established within the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. It was an all-university council with a representative from every college. Ed Schu, was the Dean of the Humphrey Institute on the Twin Cities Campus and he chaired the Rural Development Council. I represented Morris on that council and received a lot of support and guidance.

Another entity that helped provide funding to the Center was the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) located within the Humphrey Institute. CURA operated as kind of an autonomous unit that basically did on a larger scale what CST did here in this region. But, being located in the Humphrey Institute on the Twin Cities campus, it focused more on metropolitan issues than on rural issues. CURA Director, Tom Scott, and Associate Director, and Tom Anding, were very supportive of us getting started out here. They provided some funding for us in the early years. I think it was about \$10k for a couple of years to get started. Now the Center still cooperates with CURA and gets some funding for the student assistance programs for community assistance.

The Center for Rural Design, located in the College of Agriculture, and its Director, Dewey Thorbeck, was another resource and partnered on county-wide and property specific planning (\$50,000, 1998).

A former UMM political science professor, Greg Thorson, got very involved in some of the activities of the Center. He did a study on public school financing, and research on healthcare in the region. He was able to actually work with the state legislature in presenting and getting bills written for providing funding for schools and for health care. This experience helped him obtain an endowed chair position at the University of Redlands in California. Statistics Professors Engin Sungur and Jon Anderson were helpful in doing analysis of data with Ben who had been one of their students.

Projects with CST got many of our faculty on the campus focused more on local issues rather than theoretical issues; they focused their research on local issues rather than esoteric issues elsewhere.

Zak: Did you look at other models?

There were a few models that we looked at and researched to see what they were doing. There were not too many out there focused on rural communities. There was a group at Kansas State University that got a grant from FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) and we collaborated with that group in setting up a rural focus within some of the national continuing education professional organizations that we belonged to. I remember going to Utah and Kentucky to look at programs and talk with faculty from those states.

Missouri was working on rural issues and when Ben went to Missouri for his master's degree, there were faculty there who were doing outreach in small towns. We had them come to UMM and do some training. Also, Dr. Randy Cantrell from the University of Nebraska consulted with us.

I think we were fortunate to receive the support we did from both UMM Chancellor David Johnson, and U of M President Bob Bruininks. David was a firm believer in what the Center was doing and Bob Bruininks was too; they provided funding for the Center in its very crucial developmental years. Those two individuals, along with Dean Harold Miller and Dean Pat Borich and CURA, deserve due credit for helping get CST started and solidifying it with funding and support.

I don't know how President Kaler views University outreach, but previous University Presidents Bob Bruininks, and Nils Hasselmo before him, really took the land grant mission at the U of M to heart, and said "yes, we have got to do an excellent job of teaching and yes, we have got to do research and discovery, but yes we have to do service and outreach too."

I think it was a supportive environment at the time that the Center came into being.

P.S. One more feature of CST is the Symposium. We had previously organized "Conversations" about small town issues, but wanted to broaden that concept statewide. The idea of a "Symposium" was born on a warm spring evening when Carol and I were having a glass of wine on our deck at home listening to Peter Ostroushko's mandolin playing on MPR's Prairie Home Companion. We thought, "let's combine scholarly learning with good food and entertainment, and share the CST story."

Dr. Roger S. McCannon, 1975-2004 Retired
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